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Gandhi's Strategic Use of Print Media: Unifying India for Freedom and Reform

Rahul Ranjan*
Anshu**

Abstract

Mahatma Gandhi's adept use of print media was instrumental in unifying India's diverse populace during the independence movement. His publications, including Young India, Navjivan, and Harijan, provided a platform for disseminating his philosophy of Satyagraha (non-violent resistance), promoting social justice, and advocating for economic self-reliance through the Swadeshi movement. Gandhi transformed the press into a strategic tool, connecting local grievances, such as peasant distress and caste-based discrimination, with national causes for independence. By reaching both urban and rural audiences, Gandhi used his newspapers to foster a sense of Swaraj (self-rule) that transcended mere political autonomy, emphasizing social equality and economic independence. Through mass mobilization and symbolism—such as the spinning wheel (Charkha) and the Salt March—Gandhi galvanized Indians across regions and classes. His print-based advocacy not only challenged British authority but also reshaped public consciousness, creating a moral narrative for unity and resilience. Building upon earlier Bengali reformers who used pamphlets for social reform, Gandhi's strategic use of print media enabled him to turn the fight for freedom into an inclusive, nationwide movement, laying the foundation for a just and self-sufficient India.

Keywords

Economic Self-Reliance, Untouchability, Hindi Public Sphere, Print Culture, Nationalism, Pamphlets, National Identity.

* * * * *

Introduction

Mahatma Gandhi's role in India's struggle for independence is unparalleled, not just because of his leadership against colonial rule, but due to his ability to transform deeply entrenched social, economic, and political issues into a nationwide movement. Before Gandhi's emergence as a leader, issues like peasant distress, untouchability, economic dependence on foreign goods, and the importance of self-reliance were often addressed only in localized

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or fragmented ways. Gandhi, however, brought these issues into the national spotlight, using them to unify the Indian populace against British rule and to instill a sense of Swaraj (self-rule) that went beyond mere political independence to include social justice and economic self-sufficiency. His methods, which included Satyagraha (non-violent resistance), mass mobilization, and the strategic use of symbols, allowed him to communicate his vision to Indians across the country, from Jammu and Kashmir to Kanyakumari.

Gandhi's Focus on Key Issues

Addressing Peasant Distress and Agrarian Struggles –

Gandhi's early involvement in India's nationalist movement began with his efforts to address the economic exploitation of peasants under colonial rule. One of his first significant movements was the Champaran Satyagraha in 1917 in Bihar, where he supported indigo farmers who were being forced by European planters to cultivate indigo under exploitative conditions. The farmers were bound by oppressive tinkathia system contracts, which required them to dedicate a portion of their land to indigo cultivation even when it was unprofitable. Gandhi's decision to support the cause came after he met with Raj Kumar Shukla, a peasant leader, who convinced him to visit Champaran. On arrival, Gandhi faced immediate resistance from local authorities who attempted to banish him from the region. Gandhi's refusal to leave, even under threat of arrest, exemplified his commitment to non-violent resistance and his willingness to face legal consequences for a just cause.

The Champaran Satyagraha became a turning point, showcasing the power of non-violent civil disobedience. Judith M. Brown, in her book *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope*, notes that the Champaran struggle demonstrated Gandhi's ability to transform a localized agrarian issue into a national cause, thereby introducing the masses to the concept of Satyagraha (Brown, 1991). Through mass mobilization, Gandhi organized volunteers and legal experts to document the grievances of thousands of peasants, ultimately forcing the colonial administration to set up a committee to investigate their conditions. This led to significant relief measures, including the abolition of the tinkathia system, providing immediate economic respite to the farmers.

In Kheda (1918), Gandhi intervened in a different agrarian crisis in Gujarat, where the peasants were suffering due to a failure of crops and drought. The British, however, refused to waive taxes despite the farmers' inability to pay. Gandhi urged the farmers to engage in a tax strike, encouraging them to refuse to pay land revenue until their demands for tax suspension were met. B.R. Nanda, in *Mahatma Gandhi: A Biography*, points out that the Kheda struggle exemplified Gandhi's approach of emphasizing moral persuasion and collective action over confrontation (Nanda, 1989). His non-violent resistance strategy gained the support of leaders like Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and mobilized large segments of the rural population, which eventually forced the British authorities to grant concessions to the peasants.

These movements set the precedent for civil disobedience as a tool of resistance, turning Gandhi into a national figure capable of leading grassroots mobilization. The Champaran and Kheda movements demonstrated that non-violent protest could challenge colonial policies and bring rural India's issues to the forefront of the national political agenda.

Campaign Against Untouchability and Social Reform -

Gandhi's campaign against untouchability marked a significant shift in the social dimensions of India's nationalist struggle. He viewed the abolition of untouchability as an essential aspect of Swaraj, believing that no society could achieve true freedom while discriminating against a section of its own population. He referred to those marginalized by the caste system as Harijans, or 'children of God,' aiming to change societal attitudes and uplift those who had been marginalized for centuries. This stance was especially radical in a society where caste divisions were deeply entrenched and where even reform-minded nationalists often avoided confronting the issue of caste.

Gandhi's work in the All India Harijan Tour (1933-34) stands out as a concerted effort to bring the issue of untouchability to the national consciousness. He traveled across the country, urging upper-caste Hindus to discard their prejudices and advocating for the integration of untouchables into mainstream society. His speeches emphasized the moral and spiritual failure of a society that discriminated against its own people. Louis Fischer, in *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, asserts that Gandhi's relentless focus on the plight of the Harijans challenged the very foundations of orthodox Hinduism, making untouchability a central issue in the broader struggle for independence (Fischer, 1950).

Gandhi's efforts went beyond rhetoric; he initiated practical measures like setting up schools for Harijan children, organizing cleanliness drives, and encouraging village upliftment programs. He also published articles in Harijan, a weekly newspaper dedicated to social reform, where he wrote about the need for temple entry for untouchables, access to public wells, and equal educational opportunities. Bhikhu Parekh, in *Gandhi's Political Philosophy: A Critical Examination*, notes that Gandhi's approach to social justice integrated the struggle for social equality with the fight for political freedom, making the eradication of untouchability a core part of the nationalist agenda (Parekh, 1989). This was a significant departure from earlier nationalist leaders who often focused solely on political issues while sidestepping social reforms.

Promotion of Swadeshi and Economic Self-Reliance -

The Swadeshi movement became one of the pillars of Gandhi's economic philosophy, aimed at reducing India's dependence on British imports and fostering economic self-sufficiency. Although the concept of Swadeshi had emerged earlier during the Bengal Partition of 1905, Gandhi expanded its scope and turned it into a mass movement. He believed that economic independence was a prerequisite for political independence, and that true Swaraj could only be achieved when Indians developed their own industries and rejected foreign goods.

Central to Gandhi's Swadeshi philosophy was the Charkha (spinning wheel). He urged every Indian to spin their own yarn and wear khadi (handspun cloth), emphasizing the importance of local production and the revival of traditional crafts. The Charkha became a powerful symbol of self-reliance and resistance to British exploitation. By promoting the Charkha, Gandhi aimed to provide economic sustenance to rural India, which had suffered from the decline of traditional handicrafts due to the influx of British manufactured goods. According to Partha Chatterjee in *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Gandhi's emphasis on Swadeshi was a way to connect economic nationalism with the political struggle for independence, making it relevant to both the urban elite and the rural poor (Chatterjee, 1993).

Gandhi's use of symbolism in promoting the Charkha turned it into a unifying emblem of the independence movement. He even made the spinning wheel part of the Congress flag, symbolizing the centrality of economic self-reliance to the freedom movement. Judith Brown, in *Gandhi and Civil Disobedience: The Mahatma in Indian Politics 1928-34*, argues that the Charkha became a symbolic weapon that allowed Indians to reject foreign economic domination while actively participating in the freedom struggle (Brown, 2008). The Swadeshi campaign also played a key role during the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920-22) and Civil Disobedience Movement (1930-34), with boycotts of British goods becoming widespread and deeply impacting the colonial economy.

Tools and Strategies for Dissemination

Satyagraha: A Philosophy of Non-Violent Resistance -

Satyagraha, or truth-force, was Gandhi's foundational principle for political action and social reform. Unlike earlier forms of resistance that often involved violence, Gandhi's Satyagraha emphasized moral persuasion, self-discipline, and non-violence as the means to achieve political goals. Gandhi first developed the concept during his time in South Africa, where he organized Indians to fight against discriminatory laws through peaceful resistance. Upon returning to India, he adapted Satyagraha to address the unique challenges of colonial oppression.

Through Satyagraha, Gandhi mobilized millions of Indians, enabling them to participate in the freedom struggle without resorting to violence. The Non-Cooperation Movement (1920-22) was one of the first major Satyagraha campaigns, where Gandhi called upon Indians to boycott British schools, courts, and products. The movement saw participation from students, professionals, and industrial workers, marking a shift from elite-driven nationalism to mass participation. Sumit Sarkar, in *Modern India: 1885-1947*, points out that Satyagraha allowed Gandhi to transform passive discontent into active resistance, turning ordinary Indians into agents of political change (Sarkar, 1983).

The Salt March of 1930, another example of Satyagraha, was a direct challenge to British monopoly over salt production. Gandhi's 240-mile march to the coastal town of Dandi, where he made salt by evaporating seawater, became a symbolic act against

British laws and galvanized national support. The Civil Disobedience Movement that followed saw thousands of Indians defying British laws, organizing boycotts, and protests. The movement also drew significant international attention, bringing the issue of India's independence into the global spotlight. Louis Fischer observes that the Salt March transformed the image of the Indian struggle, showcasing the power of symbolic non-violent resistance on the global stage (Fischer, 1950).

Mass Mobilization and Symbolism -

Gandhi had an exceptional ability to use symbols that resonated with the masses, turning everyday actions into acts of political defiance. The Charkha, khadi, and salt became symbols of self-sufficiency, dignity, and defiance against colonial rule. The Salt March, in particular, demonstrated how Gandhi could take a seemingly mundane issue and turn it into a mass movement. B.R. Nanda notes that by focusing on an essential item like salt, which touched the lives of all Indians, rich or poor, Gandhi was able to communicate the broader implications of British economic exploitation (Nanda, 1989).

Gandhi also utilized public prayer meetings, mass gatherings, and fasts to engage with people and convey his message. His fasts, such as those during the campaign against untouchability, were acts of self-sacrifice that drew national and international attention. Gandhi's prayer meetings served as platforms where he addressed large audiences, spoke against untouchability, and urged for Hindu-Muslim unity. Bhikhu Parekh highlights that Gandhi's strategic use of symbolism and his ability to simplify complex issues made his messages accessible to people from all backgrounds, creating a national ethos that transcended regional, linguistic, and caste divisions (Parekh, 1989).

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, as India grappled with the challenges of colonial rule, the use of pamphlets, journals, and newspapers emerged as powerful tools for political mobilization and social reform. These printed materials served as vehicles for expressing dissent, advocating social changes, and galvanizing public opinion against the British Empire. Bengal, often regarded as the intellectual and cultural heartland of early Indian reform, was home to pioneering reformers who utilized pamphlets to address pressing issues such as Sati, child marriage, women's education, and colonial exploitation. Leaders like Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and Keshab Chandra Sen effectively used pamphlets to challenge prevailing social norms and articulate new visions of society. Their efforts laid the groundwork for the freedom struggle that would intensify in the 20th century.

Mahatma Gandhi, building upon the legacy of these earlier reformers, recognized the potential of journals and newspapers as tools to disseminate his philosophy of Satyagraha, advocate for social justice, and mobilize mass participation in the fight for independence. Gandhi's strategic use of publications such as *Young India*, *Navjivan*, and *Harijan* allowed him to reach a diverse audience, spanning from the urban elite to the rural masses.

Early Reformers of Bengal and the Use of Pamphlets -

The Bengal Renaissance, which began in the early 19th century, was a period marked by intellectual awakening and social reform. During this time, reformers in Bengal began to

challenge regressive social practices and colonial oppression, using pamphlets as a means to articulate their ideas and reach a wider audience. Pamphlets were relatively inexpensive and easy to distribute, making them an effective way to communicate in an era when access to formal political platforms was limited.

Raja Rammohan Roy: Champion of Social Reform and the Fight Against Sati

Raja Rammohan Roy (1772-1833) is widely considered the father of the Bengal Renaissance and one of the first Indians to use pamphlets as a tool for social and cultural transformation. Roy's polyglot abilities enabled him to reach diverse audiences in Persian, English, Sanskrit, and Bengali, and he used his language skills to create a rich body of pamphlets and tracts. His writings primarily focused on social reforms within Hindu society and critiques of religious orthodoxy.

One of Roy's most influential pamphlets, *A Conference Between an Advocate for, and an Opponent of the Practice of Burning Widows Alive* (1818), was written as a dialogue between two characters, allowing him to present rational arguments against the practice of Sati. He used Hindu scriptures such as the Vedas and Upanishads to argue that Sati was not mandated by religious texts, but rather a product of distorted interpretations. Roy's pamphlet served as a moral and logical critique of Sati, appealing to both Indian reformers and British officials. As Judith M. Brown notes in *Modern India: The Origins of an Asian Democracy*, "Rammohan Roy's pamphlets were radical not only for their content but for their mode of address, inviting both the Indian and British public into a discourse on reform" (Brown 1985, 63).

Roy's pamphlets were instrumental in creating public awareness about the inhumanity of Sati, leading to the Abolition of Sati Act in 1829 by the British Governor-General Lord William Bentinck. While the British government officially took credit for the ban, it was Roy's relentless intellectual advocacy through pamphlets that laid the foundation for this reform. His pamphlets sparked debate and discussion in both India and England, demonstrating the potential of printed words to influence policy and shape public opinion.

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar: Education & Gender Reforms Through Pamphleteering

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891), another towering figure of the Bengal Renaissance, used pamphlets to advocate for women's education, widow remarriage, and the abolition of polygamy. Vidyasagar's most notable pamphlet, *Bahubivaha* (1855), critiqued the practice of polygamy among upper-caste Hindus and argued for the remarriage of widows. He meticulously referenced Hindu scriptures, using shastric arguments to counter orthodox Hindu opposition. By doing so, Vidyasagar not only aimed to transform societal attitudes but also sought to convince British administrators to legislate reforms.

Vidyasagar's use of pamphlets allowed him to engage directly with the intellectual class in Bengal, creating a public discourse around the rights of women and the importance of education. As Partha Chatterjee notes in *The Nation and Its Fragments*, Vidyasagar's

pamphlets were "instruments of an emerging public sphere in Bengal, where debates over tradition and modernity could be articulated and contested" (Chatterjee 1993, 115). His advocacy played a critical role in the passage of the Hindu Widow Remarriage Act of 1856, which was a landmark in the legal recognition of women's rights in India.

Vidyasagar's pamphlets were not only significant for their reformist content but also for the empathy and moral passion they conveyed. His writings often focused on the suffering of child widows and the moral duty of society to provide them with a dignified life. He used pamphlets as a means to humanize the issues, making them accessible to a broader audience and appealing to their sense of compassion and justice.

Keshab Chandra Sen: Bridging Religious Reform and Political Awakening

Keshab Chandra Sen (1838-1884), a leader of the Brahmo Samaj, also relied heavily on pamphlets to spread his ideas about religious reform and social change. Sen was concerned with modernizing Hinduism while retaining its spiritual core. He published pamphlets such as *Brahmo Samaj Vindicated* (1865), in which he advocated for monotheism, social equality, and educational advancement.

Sen's pamphlets targeted young educated Bengalis, urging them to abandon superstitions and embrace rationalism. He envisioned a universal religion that combined the ethical teachings of Christianity with Hindu spiritualism. Sumit Sarkar, in *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal 1903-1908*, highlights that Sen's pamphlets played a pivotal role in constructing a public space where religious, social, and political issues could be freely discussed (Sarkar 1973, 23). This emerging public sphere of debate and discussion fostered a critical consciousness among the Bengali middle class, which later evolved into a political awakening against colonial rule.

Sen's pamphlets, like those of Roy and Vidyasagar, were not limited to religious or social issues; they also contained a nationalist undertone. His calls for self-respect, moral courage, and spiritual regeneration resonated with a growing nationalist sentiment in Bengal, paving the way for the Swadeshi movement in the early 20th century. This legacy of using print culture as a means of awakening public consciousness was a tradition that Gandhi would later adopt and expand upon during the national freedom struggle.

Mahatma Gandhi and the Strategic Use of Publications in the Freedom Struggle

Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) emerged as one of the most influential figures in India's freedom struggle, and like the early Bengal reformers, he understood the power of the printed word. However, Gandhi expanded the use of publications beyond local issues, using them as a national and international platform to advocate for Swaraj (self-rule), social justice, and non-violent resistance. His strategic use of journals and newspapers such as *Young India*, *Navjivan*, and *Harijan* allowed him to articulate his philosophy and mobilize the masses across the country. Partha Chatterjee, in *The Nation and Its Fragments*, argues that Gandhi's use of the press allowed him to engage with both the

urban elite and the rural masses, building a network of communication that linked nationalist leaders with grassroots supporters (Chatterjee, 1993).

Gandhi's writings served as a way to clarify his principles, respond to criticisms, and educate the public on issues ranging from untouchability to self-rule. His autobiography, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, offered a personal account of his spiritual and political journey, allowing readers to understand the moral basis of his actions. By using the press to articulate his ideas, Gandhi was able to create a national conversation around the issues that mattered most to the Indian struggle for freedom.

Young India: A Journal for Articulating Satyagraha and Political Strategy

Young India, published in English, became one of Gandhi's most influential platforms. It was aimed at reaching the educated urban population, including Indian intellectuals, British officials, and international audiences. In its pages, Gandhi outlined the principles of Satyagraha, providing detailed explanations of non-violent resistance, civil disobedience, and the moral philosophy behind truth-force. He used the journal to critique British policies, such as the Rowlatt Act and the Salt Tax, and to articulate the ethical dimensions of resistance.

Gandhi's editorials in *Young India* were known for their clarity and directness, making complex political ideas accessible to the general public. Judith Brown, in *Gandhi and Civil Disobedience: The Mahatma in Indian Politics 1928-34*, argues that *Young India* was more than just a publication; it was a "weapon of non-violent warfare", shaping the ideological framework of the Non-Cooperation Movement and the Civil Disobedience Movement (Brown 1985, 89). Gandhi used the journal to call for boycotts of British goods, protests against unjust laws, and constructive programs such as village industries and education reform.

One of the most notable examples of Gandhi's use of *Young India* was his articulation of the Salt March of 1930. In a series of articles, he explained why the monopoly on salt represented the broader economic exploitation of India by the British. By presenting the Salt March as a symbol of national defiance, Gandhi transformed a simple act into a mass movement that resonated with Indians across regions. Louis Fischer, in *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, notes that Gandhi's writings in *Young India* gave the Civil Disobedience Movement its moral direction, encouraging people to see the fight against the British as a spiritual duty (Fischer 1950, 152).

Navjivan: Reaching Rural India with the Message of Self-Reliance

Navjivan, published in Gujarati, was aimed at rural audiences and those who did not speak English. Gandhi used this publication to communicate directly with peasants, artisans, and small traders in the vernacular, emphasizing the importance of economic self-reliance and local governance. Through *Navjivan*, he advocated for the revival of village industries, particularly the spinning of khadi, which he saw as a way to combat poverty and undermine British textile imports.

Gandhi's focus in *Navjivan* was not only on economic issues but also on moral upliftment. He wrote extensively about cleanliness, self-discipline, and the dignity of labor, encouraging rural Indians to see themselves as active participants in the freedom struggle. His emphasis on self-reliance through Swadeshi connected the economic struggle for Swaraj with cultural pride, making the freedom movement relevant to the daily lives of ordinary Indians. As Partha Chatterjee points out, Gandhi's use of *Navjivan* allowed him to "integrate the ethos of rural India into the national movement, creating a cultural narrative that opposed colonial modernity with a vision of Indian self-sufficiency" (Chatterjee 1993, 165).

Harijan: Addressing Social Inequities and the Issue of Untouchability

Harijan, launched in 1933, was dedicated to the eradication of untouchability and the upliftment of marginalized communities. Gandhi believed that social reform was essential for the moral regeneration of India, and he used *Harijan* to advocate for temple entry for untouchables, educational opportunities, and social equality. Bhikhu Parekh, in *Gandhi's Political Philosophy: A Critical Examination*, observes that *Harijan* provided Gandhi with a platform to directly challenge orthodox Hindu practices and to promote inter-caste harmony as a necessary step toward national unity (Parekh 1989, 137).

Through *Harijan*, Gandhi engaged in a dialogue with conservative Hindu leaders, urging them to recognize the spiritual equality of all Indians. He also used the publication to mobilize support for Harijan upliftment tours, where he traveled to villages across India, emphasizing the moral duty of every Indian to end caste discrimination. *Harijan* was instrumental in shifting the discourse on social reform from a purely political narrative to one that included moral and ethical considerations.

Newspapers as a Tool for National Mobilization

Beyond his journals, Gandhi recognized the potential of newspapers as tools for national mobilization and political education. Newspapers allowed Gandhi to maintain a direct line of communication with his followers, even during periods of imprisonment or state censorship. He used them to issue directives, clarify strategies, and counter British propaganda.

During the Salt March, for example, Gandhi used *Young India* to explain the symbolic significance of salt as a representation of economic exploitation. This enabled Indians across the country to understand the larger struggle behind the specific act of making salt, leading to widespread participation in the Civil Disobedience Movement. By making local actions like the manufacture of salt into national symbols, Gandhi was able to foster a sense of unity among India's diverse regions.

Gandhi's newspapers also served as platforms for self-criticism and introspection. He often used them to admit mistakes, reconsider strategies, and encourage his followers to engage in ethical reflection. This approach helped create a culture of accountability

within the Indian National Congress and among freedom fighters, setting a tone of moral leadership that distinguished Gandhi from other political leaders.

As Sumit Sarkar writes, "Gandhi's use of the press was an exercise in pedagogic politics, where the aim was not just to communicate a message but to transform the consciousness of his audience, creating a new moral community that could envision an independent India" (Sarkar 1983, 229). This pedagogical aspect of Gandhi's publications helped to build a shared national ethos that transcended regional, linguistic, and caste divisions.

Reaching the Length and Breadth of India: From Jammu and Kashmir to Kanyakumari

Gandhi's ability to reach every corner of India and unify people across regions was crucial to the success of the freedom struggle. He traveled extensively, visiting remote villages and interacting directly with farmers, artisans, tribal communities, and urban workers. These travels allowed him to understand local grievances and integrate them into the broader national struggle. Sumit Sarkar observes that Gandhi's grassroots approach made the freedom movement truly inclusive, bringing rural India into the political mainstream and transforming the independence struggle into a mass movement (Sarkar, 1983).

His foot marches, such as the Dandi March, were not just acts of protest but also opportunities to connect with people, gather support, and raise awareness. By incorporating local issues into the national struggle, such as land rights for peasants or access to temple entry for Harijans, Gandhi created a movement that was relevant to all Indians, regardless of their background or region.

Conclusion

Mahatma Gandhi's leadership in the Indian independence movement was marked by his unique ability to address key social and economic issues that had long been overlooked. His focus on peasant distress, untouchability, swadeshi, and the Charkha brought these issues to the forefront of the national consciousness, turning them into pillars of the independence struggle. Through Satyagraha, mass mobilization, symbolism, and the effective use of print media, Gandhi created a movement that transcended regional and social barriers, uniting Indians in a common struggle for Swaraj. His efforts not only challenged British rule but also laid the groundwork for a vision of India that aspired to be both politically independent and socially just. The use of pamphlets, journals, and newspapers played a pivotal role in shaping the social and political consciousness of Indians during the freedom struggle. Early reformers in Bengal, such as Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and Keshab Chandra Sen, used pamphlets to challenge social norms and colonial oppression, creating a public sphere where new ideas could flourish. Mahatma Gandhi, building upon this tradition, used journals like *Young India*, *Navjivan*, and *Harijan* to articulate a vision for Swaraj that included political freedom, social justice, and economic self-reliance. His strategic use of newspapers allowed him to mobilize the masses, shape

public opinion, and create a moral narrative that united the nation. Together, these efforts demonstrate how the printed word became a weapon of resistance in the fight for independence, enabling Indians to envision a future free from colonial domination.

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